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# Dog Show's Rare Breeds Are Glimpse of History

By KATIE THOMAS

As Baxter the otterhound bounded around the show ring at the [Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show](#) on Monday, his owner, Cathy Glenn, felt sure he would win best in breed — and not just because he had won the prize three years running.

The crowd was equally certain of his chances for victory: although five dogs had been entered in the show, Baxter was the only one who showed up.

The dogs' scarcity at Westminster is an apt metaphor for the breed itself. The [otterhound](#) — a big, goofy mess of a dog with a slobbery beard, unruly coat and happy-go-lucky grin — was once sought after in England because it kept the country's river otter population in check. Today, an estimated 350 of the dogs are living in the United States, and fewer than 1,000 are said to exist worldwide.

The otterhound is one of several English breeds on display at Westminster that have dwindled to near obscurity despite a proud history. Much like an heirloom rose or tomato, the dogs are living artifacts of a bygone era kept alive by a group of passionate breeders.

Other examples of classic but rare breeds include [the Dandie Dinmont terrier](#), a dog with a [Kim Jong-il](#) hairstyle whose roots date to the 1700s; [the field spaniel](#), a once-popular hunting companion that has been overshadowed by its smaller cousin, the cocker spaniel; and [the harrier](#), a noble hunting dog that looks like a beagle on steroids.

For many owners, the dogs' heritage forms part of their appeal. "I think it's very cool that you look at a painting of dogs from 200 years ago, and they look like dogs that we have today," said Joellen Gregory, the owner of three otterhounds, including Baxter's brother.

If these heirloom breeds have a hero, [it is Stump](#), the 10-year-old Sussex spaniel who won Best in Show at Westminster in 2009. The Sussex spaniel was one of nine breeds originally recognized by the American Kennel Club in 1884, but they are an unusual sight today, ranking 155th in annual registrations out of the kennel club's 167 ranked breeds.

The issue has not gone unnoticed in the United Kingdom, where the Kennel Club, the British counterpart of the A.K.C., has mounted a campaign to protect 24 breeds that it has labeled "vulnerable."

To encourage its countrymen to buy British, the Kennel Club holds annual breed showcases, called

“Discover Dogs,” where the endangered breeds get special billing. The club has organized parades featuring the dogs and their handlers, who dress as historical characters with links to the breeds.

Last fall, the British clothing designer Jeremy Hackett warned in a [newspaper article](#) that his beloved Sussex spaniels — which are featured in many of his clothing advertisements — have a popularity that is “on a par with whalebone corsets and powdered eggs.”

“The whole idea is simply to re-educate the public about the benefits of some of the old British and Irish breeds,” said Caroline Kisko, a spokeswoman for the Kennel Club. “I think the main concern is that we have — as in the United States — we have a public that has become more and more accustomed to thinking that the Labrador retriever is the No. 1 possible pet, and the other breeds are just being forgotten.”

Rare-breed enthusiasts say they have devoted themselves to the dogs in part for the novelty. Nichole Dooley, a field spaniel breeder from Boston, said people often stop her on the street when she is with her dogs, which are often confused for cocker or springer spaniels. “They say, ‘I had one of those when I was little,’ ” Dooley said. “I’m like, no, you didn’t.”

But the main attraction, dog owners say, is the idiosyncrasies of each individual breed. Glenn Baxter’s owner, said otterhounds are clowns. They tend to sleep with all four feet in the air, and Baxter is so obsessed with having his hind scratched that he introduces himself to strangers by backing into them.

Dooley said field spaniels tend to be calmer than other spaniels. “They’re a well-kept secret,” she said.

The field spaniel fell out of favor in the middle of the 20th century, losing out to the rising stars of the springer and cocker spaniels. They virtually disappeared from the United States in the 1940s and ’50s, before being revived in the 1960s after a breeder imported a handful of dogs from England. Every field spaniel in the United States today can trace its lineage to four dogs from the 1950s and ’60s, said Jane Chopson, president of the Field Spaniel Society of America.

“We joke in our breed that we don’t have a gene pool, we have a gene puddle,” Dooley said.

Extinction is a rarity in recent years, but canine history is full of cautionary tales. Many times, the dogs disappeared after they lost their jobs. In the Middle Ages, many households [employed a turnspit dog](#), a breed developed to turn roasting meat by running inside a small cage that resembled a hamster wheel. Modern cooking technologies eliminated the need for turnspit dogs, and they faded away.

Aficionados of otterhounds and harriers say their breeds are also victims of changing times. Owners of both breeds worry that the dogs may become extinct, possibly as soon as 10 to 15 years from now.

Otter hunting was outlawed in England decades ago, and after that, demand for otterhounds dropped. “You’re talking about an ancient breed that no longer has a job,” said Betsy Conway, an otterhound owner and advocate.

Because of their small gene pool, otterhounds suffer from physical ailments, although Conway said breeders

were working to address the issue. Of particular concern is late-onset epilepsy, which can surface after an otterhound has already produced offspring, as well as decreasing litter size and female dogs who have difficulty conceiving.

The harriers' métier — chasing hares — was also outlawed several years ago, leading to concerns that they will eventually disappear in England, where the dogs are kept exclusively in hunting packs. Harriers in the United States are third-to-last in the [A.K.C.'s popularity list](#) and are mostly kept as pets. Less than 100 are believed to be living in the United States.

Breeders of harriers import dogs from England every few years to infuse fresh genes into the United States stock. "If we're cut off from that, or if there's some reason that there's a difficulty with that, then it's questionable if there is enough genetic diversity for this breed to exist," said Kevin Shupenia, a Georgia breeder who owns about 20 harriers.

Still, Conway said owning an otterhound was worth it. "The negatives to me certainly are so minor in comparison to the wonderful things about life with an otterhound," she said.

"Why have otterhounds? Because they are a piece of history," she said. To those who question whether the dogs have outlived their usefulness, she answers: "What difference does it make if we have polar bears or mountain gorillas? What do you need them for?"

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

**Correction: February 16, 2011**

A picture caption in some editions on Tuesday with an article about fading breeds at the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show misidentified the woman shown walking Baxter, an otterhound who was the only one of his breed to appear at the show. She is Kathryn Gertler, Baxter's handler — not Cathy Glenn, his owner.